

Confirmation Hearing Statement – Peake

Mr Chairman, Senator Burr, Ladies and Gentlemen of the committee.

Senator Akaka, Thank you for scheduling this hearing so expeditiously.

I deeply appreciate the confidence of the President in this nomination and am honored and humbled to be before you today seeking your endorsement to become the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. I want to thank Senator Inouye and Senator Bob Dole for their kind words of introduction. I have held each of these great leaders in such huge esteem for so long, each of them representing service to this nation – in the military, wounded in battle, and a full career of public service to follow . . . their endorsement, alone, underscores the responsibility that I know comes with this job.

As has happened so often in my Army Career, my wife Janice is taking care of our family... my son, Tom, is graduating with his Masters Degree down in Texas and she and my daughter are traveling to be with him. She has been my mainstay on this journey that brings me before you and I could not be more fortunate. ... With the career I have had, there is also an extended

military family. There are a number in the audience today, but I would like to introduce one special member of that Army family... and that is Mr Rick Bunger. Rick was my Radio-Telephone Operator when I was a platoon leader in Vietnam. He is a Veteran... who came home, and went from rodeo bull rider to a successful businessman. He has travelled from Arizona to be here with me today. I never dreamed that, in front of this committee that cares so much about Veterans, I would have the opportunity to thank him for his service, but I am delighted to do that now.... for the record!

I want to thank each of you on the committee for finding time to meet with me individually. I was deeply impressed and appreciate your individual commitment to our Veterans and to the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I listened carefully to your concerns.

They ranged from the very real challenge of the transition from DoD to VA care; the attendant issues of sharing information between these Departments– the importance of the continuity of care. To the very nature and quality of that care across the VA system. And not just the quality, but the access to that care – access that is timely with minimum bureaucracy.

The special challenges of Rural healthcare as it relates to access for our Veterans was an issue that I heard from many of you; and of the special challenges this poses for mental health in particular.

I appreciate the universal concern that PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury may be less apparent than some of the horrendous physical wounds that we see fresh from the battlefields. But, that these injuries are, none-the-less real, and are likely to become the signature injury of this conflict. The great advances in prosthetic devices that allow our amputees the opportunity for maximal functioning need to be matched with the same kind of advances in dealing with the mental health issues of our Veterans and of their families. That means research, developing the base of mental health providers, insuring access, addressing stigma, developing practice guidelines, measuring the outcomes and providing support to address the co-morbid conditions.

You spoke to me about Gulf War Illness. Even now, 15 years later, we do not have clear answers for those who returned from Desert Shield and Desert Storm with unexplained illnesses. I know and share your concern that this not be forgotten; that we continue to care for those men and women and continue to seek

answers to the questions of why, not just for them, but for future Veterans as well.

I appreciate your concerns about the VA infrastructure; insuring that VA forecasting is done well to insure that we make the right investments to have the appropriate physical and human infrastructure to care for the evolving demography of our Veteran populations.

I heard, clearly, the dissatisfaction with Veterans waiting excessive periods of time to have their claims adjudicated; of the importance in reducing the backlog of claims while, at the same time, insuring consistency in our rating process. While I am gratified that the VA has nearly 3,000 new claims people on board and in training, I look forward, if confirmed, to moving forward with making the system less complex, more understandable, and better supported with the tools of information technology. A Veteran should not need a lawyer to figure out what benefit is due... or to get that benefit.

Every single one of these issues that I heard from you is important. Each is complex and each needs both short term and long term approaches as we honor our commitment to those who have served

before; to this most recent population of combat Veterans; it is important that we get it right for them now.

The issue at hand today, is why me... given the challenges I have outlined, the size of the organization, the complexity of the mission
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You have seen my bio . . . my father and my mother, both buried in Arlington, were in the military.. I was raised in the Army.

I chose a military career and for 38 years I cared for soldiers and their families.

I've spent time in medical centers and in troop units; I've been with them in combat zones and in disaster response operations.

50% of our Army Medical Force is in the reserves – I spent a large amount of time and energy over multiple assignments with and for these men and women who truly live up to the moniker, “twice the citizen”. I know that they have unique Veterans issues. 50% of the Army Medical Command personnel are civilians – so I've dealt with a large civilian work force.

I've learned that one cannot micro manage large organizations, one needs to delegate and trust subordinate commanders. I do believe in accountability, in facts, and data driven decisions. I have learned by asking questions and challenging assumptions. If confirmed, I will do that in the VA. ...

I will do that to try and make a difference in those issues about which we spoke in your offices To make a difference for our Veterans; for those who served in World War II and Korea whose needs may be different from the needs of my generation of Vietnam Veterans, my colleagues - my friends, who are now finding an increasing need for VA services;.... to make a difference for this next generation of combat veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq who have immediate needs quite different from those whose last battle was 40 years ago.

I know these young men and women too.... I've been responsible for training many of them; for helping build the system that is returning them from the battlefield despite serious wounds; for investing up-front in providing the best prosthesis; for trying to understand the mental health issues longitudinally beginning at the front edge of the battle field. I care about them. I appreciate the

debt that we owe them. I believe we must look proactively to their needs today, while shaping the system to meet their needs of the future.

I thank this committee for your unwavering commitment to our Nations Veterans. If confirmed I look forward to working with you with that same personal commitment.

Mr Chairman, I thank you again for this speedy hearing.

I look forward to your questions.